

# State Rural Development Councils Are Creating Public-Private Partnerships

*In 1990, the Federal Government embarked on an experiment to conduct business differently in the rural development field. At the center of that effort, known as the National Rural Development Partnership, was the creation of State Rural Development Councils. The Councils include members from Federal, State, local, and tribal governments and from for-profit and nonprofit organizations. While Councils differ widely, a study of 16 of them found that they had modest early successes in improving communication and cooperation among members, expanding rural issues beyond traditional agricultural concerns to human resource and environmental quality concerns, and addressing local problems in a more coordinated manner.*

**I**N 1990, the Federal Government, in conjunction with eight State governments, embarked on an experiment to conduct business differently in the rural development arena. This approach, known as the National Rural Development Partnership, established the National Rural Development Council (NRDC) and State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs). Each SRDC is established through a formal joint agreement signed by the Secretary of Agriculture and the State Governor. The SRDCs are made up of members from Federal, State, local, and tribal governments and from for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

These partnerships build on a series of initiatives undertaken by successive presidents to focus on the problems of citizens who live in rural America. Recognizing the changes that have taken place in the rural sector and the shift away from agriculture in many regions, administrations since the 1970's have sought to develop mechanisms

to target rural development assistance outside the U.S. Department of Agriculture, looking to other Federal agencies as well as to States for involvement.

In the years since the initial eight SRDCs were established, new Councils have been created in many States. By 1996, 37 of them were operating. Each SRDC involves multiple groups: Federal, State, local, and tribal government representatives, and representatives of for-profit and nonprofit organizations (see table 1 for typical participants). These groups voluntarily join together to improve the way rural development activities within the State are conducted. Council participation is not driven by access to program dollars; rather, with a very limited budget each Council aims to use existing resources more effectively.

The organization and activities of the Councils vary as each structure responds to the specific needs and conditions of its State. Each Council is headed by a full-time paid executive director, but relies heavily upon the time and energy volunteered by its members. These Councils are evolving mechanisms that are constantly redesigned to respond to the changing economic, social, and political realities within States.

This article reports on the findings gleaned from a study of 16 SRDCs (see "About the Study," p. 7, for details). The research, begun in 1991, was conducted by a team of academics who monitored the development of the Councils. (Publications giving greater detail on the 16 SRDCs and

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Beryl Radin is a professor of public administration and policy at the State University of New York at Albany.

Phone 518/442-5266 • Fax 518/442-5298 • E-Mail brad@cnsvox.albany.edu

In addition to the author, the team who monitored the 16 SRDCs included Robert Agranoff, Ann O'M. Bowman, C. Gregory Buntz, J. Steven Ott, Barbara S. Romzek, and Robert H. Wilson. Contact the author for further information on the team members. Support for the research reported in this article was provided by USDA-ERS, the Aspen Institute, and the Ford Foundation.

Table I

**Typical participants in State Rural Development Councils***SRDCs draw members from a wide array of public and private organizations*

<b>Federal</b>	<b>State</b>
Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service*	Aging
Army Corps of Engineers	Agriculture
Bureau of Indian Affairs	Arts
Bureau of Land Management	Budget Office
Bureau of Reclamation	Commerce
Congressional Staff	Community Development Agency
Corporation Commission	Economic Development Agency
Economic Development Administration	Economist
Education	Education
Endowment for the Arts	Employment and Training
Environmental Protection Agency	Energy
Farmers Home Administration*	Environmental Protection Agency
Federal Emergency Management Agency	Extension Service (Federal-State funded)
Federal Highway Administration	Forestry
Forest Service	Governor's Office
Health and Human Services	Health
Housing and Urban Development	Higher Education
Labor	Highways
Rural Development Administration*	Historical Society
Small Business Administration	Housing
Soil Conservation Service*	Human Services
Transportation	Legislature
Veterans Administration	Library
	Water Office
	Wildlife and Parks
<b>Local</b>	<b>Private for-profit</b>
Cities and towns	Specific businesses (banks, power companies)
Council of Governments	Statewide organizations (Chambers of Commerce, Farm Bureau)
Counties	
Local government associations	
Local school districts	
<b>Tribal governments</b>	<b>Private nonprofit</b>
	Community development organizations
	Economic development councils
	Special issue groups (cooperatives)
	Foundations
	Hospitals

\* As a result of a recent reorganization in USDA, names of these agencies were changed. However, the old names are used here because they still tend to be used by the participants.

Note: Participation varies among States. Not all of these groups play a significant role in every State rural development policy arena.

information on the NRDC are listed in "For Further Reading," p. 7.)

While each Council is different and generalizations do not apply equally to all States, the research team identified several characteristics and trends that frame the development of the SRDCs and help define them. In the broadest terms, the study concluded the following:

- The effort is unique among intergovernmental arrangements,
- The key and pervasive characteristic is collaboration among participants,

• Despite limited resources, the effort reflects a great deal of energy at all levels,

• In their early years, SRDCs have tended to focus heavily on organization and process issues as they dealt with a constantly changing environment, and

• While some SRDCs appear to have been more effective than others, as a group, the Councils had modest successes in organizing, maintaining partnerships, and working together on rural development projects.

### The Partnership Is Unique

The SRDCs represent a unique combination of intergovernmental relationships. Most attempts at improving relationships among governmental entities concentrate entirely on either vertical (Federal-State-local) or horizontal (interagency or interorganization within a single government) relationships. In contrast, the Partnership aims at both. The Partnership provides the discretion for participants to deal with all of the issues facing rural America and to cut across virtually every public program and policy at all levels of government. Each SRDC reflects an attempt to improve relationships among several governments as well as among several agencies within each of these governments—all on behalf of rural development goals. See table 2 for a list of typical results of SRDC partnerships.

### Collaboration Is Key

Collaboration is a key and pervasive characteristic of the Partnership. The Partnership combines aspects of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to designing and operating a new institutional structure. This means that ideas for action originate in many places and move both up and down and that partners share in making decisions. The collaborative ethic both supports and draws upon the wide array of participating groups. Collaboration within the SRDCs has improved coordination across agency and government boundaries on policymaking and program implementation.

During their initial stages, the SRDCs spent much of their time and energy establishing themselves as networks to

Table 2

#### Typical results of SRDC partnerships

*The partnerships function in numerous ways*

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Bring new members to the table
Develop new relationships
Foster spinoff projects and relationships
Increase members' knowledge about rural problems
Jointly define problems
Share information
Prioritize rural problems
Produce reports, newsletters
Share information and develop joint projects with other Councils
Put rural issues on a public agenda
Increase respect for members within their own organizations
Foster legislative activity related to rural issues
Increase activity and concern within Governor's office
Increase activity and concern in executive agencies
Depoliticize rural issues within State
Develop a broader rural constituency
Redefine rural policy (broaden "rural" to be more than agriculture and link rural problems and strategies to other issues)
Change allocation of resources in member groups
Review plans, proposals of member agencies

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facilitate collaboration. These networks could be viewed as "contrived networks" in that they were not created spontaneously but instead were stimulated by the Federal Government. On the other hand, the SRDCs were not mandated in law and few new resources accompanied their formation.

Key to the success of the SRDC collaborative effort is the process of convening the members—in short, getting the right people to the table. The collaborative approach does not always end conflicts or solve disagreements, but it does provide a mechanism for participants to manage their points of tension and to appreciate better the perspectives of other members.

### High-Energy But Low-Profile Strategies

SRDC members bring a very high level of commitment and energy to the effort. Despite the vagaries of intra-Council relationships and the constantly changing environment in which the SRDCs operate, participants were willing to spend their often scarce time and energy on SRDC activities. In most SRDCs, members were not content to let the full-time paid executive director provide all the leadership for the body; instead, members participated in shared leadership.

The SRDCs generally adopted a low-visibility, low-risk posture. Designed to fill gaps and take advantage of cooperative opportunities, the Councils rarely charged ahead as strong leaders in rural policy within the State. Because they do not deliver services or actually make policy decisions, the SRDCs attempt to get existing institutions to work better together. To do so, they attempt to avoid turf battles with their member institutions and shun strong positions on politically charged issues.

The "low-visibility, low-risk" description applies to all SRDCs but to different degrees. SRDCs were more important and visible in the small, homogeneous, and largely rural States. In contrast, they tended to be less visible and played a less important role in the larger States with more diverse populations and tension between urban and rural constituencies. Nonetheless, none of the SRDCs are viewed as "the" rural policy center of their State and none have yet attempted to define a comprehensive rural development strategy for their State.

### Emphasis on Organization and Process

It is not surprising that entirely new intergovernmental mechanisms would emphasize the way things are done rather than tangible traditional products. Efforts such as the SRDCs require tremendous investment in organizational and process issues.

The SRDCs contain both a synergy and a tension between an emphasis on process and an emphasis on product. On the one hand, because of the emphasis on collaboration, flexibility, and the inclusion of many partners, the SRDCs must devote substantial time and energy to developing a process in which its members will invest. Without a widely and strongly supported process, an SRDC cannot hope to produce a significant product. On the other hand, some members and observers have been impatient about the amount of time and energy devoted to setting up a process rather than dealing with substantive rural development issues. Many SRDCs have had difficulty in agreeing on the proper balance between process and product but have devised a repertoire of a range of activities (see table 3 for a list of typical activities).

Part of the reason that process issues are paramount is that the SRDCs operate within an environment characterized by turbulence and constant change. This change comes from several sources. First, over the years, the political environment has changed at both the State and Federal levels. Many SRDCs have lived through a change of State government administration. At the national level, the Clinton administration inherited the Partnership only 2 years after its formation. In addition, the Federal role has been moving from a controlling or directing posture to a role as catalyst, facilitator, and collaborative partner.

Second, the economic environment has changed, as both the national and regional economies have contracted and expanded. In addition, the physical environment has produced some important changes; for instance, several SRDCs in the Midwest found it necessary to respond to the problems created by the 1993 floods.

Other changes within the SRDCs are internally generated as membership evolves over time, constantly bringing in new members with their own ideas and agendas. This constantly changing environment has meant that the Partnership as a whole has not focused on a single unwavering goal. Because of constant change, SRDCs must be acutely aware that what works today may not work tomorrow.

### SRDC Partnership Strategies

Some SRDCs have emphasized a particular approach to encouraging intergovernmental partnerships. Three different emphases are local community participation, technical assistance, and information gathering.

**Local community participation** involves SRDC efforts at involving rural communities in bringing real-world problems to the Council. This approach has been manifested in different ways. Many SRDCs rotate their meetings around the State and allow any local person or local offi-

Table 3

#### Typical activities for the SRDCs

*Activities generally involve information sharing, policy and planning initiatives, and demonstration projects*

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**Changing rural development policy:** attempting to alter the direction in which government at any level addressed some aspect of rural programming.

**Statutory relief:** attempting to achieve adjustment to a statutory impediment to development.

**Regulatory relief:** attempting to achieve adjustments to regulatory programs, such as negotiating a different standard, waiver of program guideline or finding an alternative means of compliance.

**Management improvement systems:** developing new means of operating Federal or State programs, such as a joint application form.

**Demonstrations/developmental projects:** attempting to prototype a rural development effort or to create new program initiatives that have broader applicability, such as creation of a new product effort from existing resources or a housing demonstration.

**Data bases:** creating new information systems of use to the rural development community.

**Communication/information:** attempting to broaden knowledge about rural problems and rural development.

**New funding:** attempting to bring different sources of funding in order to create new programs for research and development into the SRDC itself.

**Cooperative ventures:** operating projects jointly by the SRDC and other entities, such as State government nonprofit agencies.

**Outreach:** holding meetings in local communities to provide technical assistance, identify problems, gather information on rural problems, and formulate future agendas.

**Leadership development:** attempting to strengthen the capacity of rural leaders through focused training projects.

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cial to address problems and issues of their choice. The New Mexico Council, for example, follows this model. Other SRDCs are more specific in focus, allowing input on specific agenda topics (for example environmental regulation). Iowa has followed this model. SRDCs that emphasize impediment removal, South Dakota for example, usually create some mechanism for communities to bring forth issues that they wish to be addressed. The Texas Council has experimented with sending a team into communities, helping the local residents to identify problems and areas of action.

**Technical assistance** refers to a variety of actions taken by the SRDCs to fill knowledge gaps in rural development. They tried to ensure that communities or Statewide rural development efforts received information or how-to demonstrations that focus on gaps in technology or professional capacities often found in rural areas. These barriers were overcome in many different ways. The Iowa Council used role-playing techniques among its members to create new partnerships in occupational health and safety issues. Others have lent process assistance. For example, the Maine Council worked to minimize permits and rationalize regulations to help growers get into cranberry production. And, the South Carolina Council developed a project that allowed several local towns to create a regional waste water treatment system.

**Information gathering** refers to SRDC efforts to examine the extent and type of rural problems and to make them known to a variety of decisionmakers. Many gathered initial information in the “environmental scan” part of their strategic plans. Others worked with university-based research bureaus to gather baseline information on the rural sector and on rural communities in their States. About half the SRDCs compiled economic and community development resource guides, providing readily accessible information for volunteers and officials in small communities. Finally, a number of SRDCs focused on gathering information on specific industries or problems, such as timber (Washington) and secondary wood products (Maine), or on compliance with environmental regulations. Information gathering was the most prevalent approach to partnership development.

### Council Project Approaches

Three different types of SRDC project approaches have emerged. The first type, **fine-tuning**, involves the SRDC in improving coordination and/or cooperation at the margins of programs. Agencies represented in the SRDC continue to carry out their normal activities. For example, Kansas and Texas have been able to get agencies to work together, and have fine-tuned the implementation of Federal assistance through such means as single Federal loan assistance applications and electronic processing of project applications. The various resource guides devel-

oped by some SRDCs appear to be a similar form of tuning up the way communities get information to access resources, yet they do not change the basic process. Iowa, South Dakota, South Carolina, and many other States have used their Councils both formally and informally to enhance the quantity and quality of contacts between Federal and State officials. Fine-tuning is the most prevalent SRDC approach to projects.

A second approach is one that is **project-oriented**. In this case, agencies represented on the SRDC convene to engage in a new effort, either focused on a specific issue or on a community or region. For example, the Mississippi Council created a poultry producers loan application process that allows State-level Small Business Administration officials to approve applications without waiting for national office action. The New Mexico Council focuses on issues specific to local needs by holding Council meetings in local areas. And, the Oregon Council developed a rural information system that provides teleconferencing and interactive data access to citizens throughout the State. In these and other situations, the intergovernmental attempt uses the agency representatives on the SRDC to manage a specific problem that has presented a barrier to development. The SRDC sees that there is a legitimate need, determines that it is within the scope of their member agencies to solve, and sets out to work through the problem.

A final approach involves activities that lead to **major shifts** away from rural development business as usual. That is, the SRDC plays a key role in developing a new way of handling a rural development problem. Few major shifts are being made because the SRDCs are new, but also because intergovernmental bodies by their nature are designed to engage in cooperative efforts or to take on specific problem-oriented projects. A number of SRDC efforts, such as Iowa’s demonstration effort in developing a consortium of Federal and State agencies and local non-profit organizations, constitute major changes in the scope of rural programming. More of these type of demonstrations will no doubt occur as the SRDCs age and develop.

Regardless of the type of project approach, few of the issues addressed by the SRDCs were of an agricultural nature. Most of their activities focus on various facets of community and economic development, involving programming in the resource acquisition area (for example, grants, loans, credit buy-downs) or in regulation management.

### Conclusions

While the original intention of the SRDC movement may have been to change rural policy, that policy is driven by State governments. Nevertheless, some States, such as Iowa, Maine, North Carolina, and Utah, saw the SRDC as

a way to support existing State rural program efforts by creating new partnerships. This role has involved bringing various agency representatives together to help smooth out intergovernmental relationships. In most of the States, however, the SRDC took on a more independent role, that of dealing with specific issues as they were presented to them and choosing to work on those of an intersectoral nature. The activities of these latter SRDCs did not appear to be part of a broader strategy, but were more isolated attempts to use a partnership approach to deal with one-time problems or to focus on issues generated by individual communities.

The Partnership has not achieved a consensus on what might—or should—be accomplished through the SRDCs. The diverse institutions and individuals participating in the SRDCs result in multiple viewpoints that change as circumstances warrant. And given an environment of constant change (including changing goals and objectives) and limited resources, expecting the SRDCs to have major impacts on rural policy and programs would be unrealistic. Rather, modest expectations for individual SRDCs are warranted.

Although most rural development efforts are ultimately aimed at improving the economy of rural areas (and, as a result, indirectly aimed at improving the living conditions of rural residents), the SRDCs cannot be assessed in terms of their immediate effect on jobs and income. This is true for at least two reasons. First, their effect on jobs and income would necessarily be quite indirect, through the building of collaborative arrangements that might in turn lead to a stronger economy. Second, they are too new to expect such effects; development is a process that requires considerable patience.

Assessed along other dimensions, however, the SRDCs have had modest successes so far. A relatively small budget produced visible and useful activity. All the SRDCs succeeded in establishing networks, or upgrading existing ones, that enable key rural development participants to collaborate more effectively. Participants were willing to spend time and energy on the effort. The SRDCs have been able to deal with a wide range of rural issues, going well beyond traditional agricultural concerns into such areas as human services and environmental quality.

Contact information for the executive directors of all current SRDCs is listed in table 4. Please contact your SRDC for information on its activities. This effort thrives on the active participation of all persons concerned with the condition of rural areas.

## For Further Reading

T. W. Bonnett, *Strategies for Rural Competitiveness: Policy Options for State Governments*, Council of Governors' Policy Advisors, Washington, DC, 1993.

B. A. Radin, "Managing Across Boundaries," *The State of Public Management*, D. F. Kettl and H. B. Milward, eds., Johns Hopkins Press, 1966.

B. A. Radin, R. Agranoff, A. Bowman, C. G. Buntz, S. Ott, B. Romzek, and R. Wilson, *New Governance for Rural America: Creating Intergovernmental Partnerships*, University Press of Kansas, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Intergovernmental Partnerships and Rural Development: An Overview Assessment of the National Rural Development Partnership*, AGES-9508, USDA-ERS, 1995.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Intergovernmental Partnerships and Rural Development: State Rural Development Councils in Sixteen States*, National Rural Development Partnership, Washington, DC, 1995.

## About the Study

A team of academics studied the State Rural Development Councils and the associated Washington-based activities of the National Rural Development Council. Using a field network methodology, the study included extensive interviews with SRDC participants, analysis of written material, and observation at various SRDC meetings. Information on activities of the National Council was collected through similar observations (see Radin and others, *Intergovernmental Partnerships and Rural Development: An Overview Assessment of the National Rural Development Partnership* for information on the NRDC). Each member of the study team was responsible for preparing from one to four State case studies. Regular team meetings provided the setting for exchanging data, comparing results, and formulating generalizations and conclusions.

The 16 SRDCs studied represent 3 generations of Rural Development Council activity. Eight of the States—Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington—were the original pilot Councils set up in 1990. Four States—Iowa, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Vermont—are "second generation" because they responded to the initial request for expansion. Four States—New York, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming—are more recent entrants into the activity and represent the "third generation" of SRDCs.

Table 4

**State Rural Development Councils***Contact your State Council's executive director for more information*

Alaska Rural Development Council  
 Chuck Akers, Executive Director  
 2221 E. Northern Lights Boulevard, Suite 132  
 Anchorage, Alaska 99508  
 Phone 907/278-5220  
 Fax 907/279-2139

Colorado Rural Development Council  
 Florine Raitano, Executive Director  
 P.O. Box 4528  
 Dillon, Colorado 80435  
 Phone 970/262-2073  
 Fax 970/262-2075

Connecticut Rural Development Council  
 Jeffrey Chmura, Executive Director  
 c/o NW Connecticut Community Technical College  
 Park Place East  
 Winstead, Connecticut 06098-1798  
 Phone 860/738-6413  
 Fax 860/738-6431

Florida State Rural Development Council  
 Karen Prentiss, Executive Director  
 107 W. Gains St., Suite 443  
 Tallahassee, Florida 32399-2000  
 Phone 904/921-0123  
 Fax 904/922-9596

Idaho Rural Development Council  
 Dick Gardner, Executive Director  
 Statehouse, Room 122  
 Boise, Idaho 83720  
 Phone 208/334-3131  
 Fax 208/334-2438

Rural Partners  
 Paul Galligos, Executive Director  
 3085 Stevenson Dr., Suite 302  
 Springfield, Illinois 62522  
 Phone 217/585-9242  
 Fax 217/585-8233

Indiana Rural Development Council  
 John Riemke, Executive Director  
 150 W. Market St., Ista Center, Suite 414  
 Indianapolis, Indiana 46204  
 Phone 317/232-8776  
 Fax 317/232-1362

Iowa Rural Development Council  
 Dave Plazak, Executive Director  
 Iowa Department of Economic Development  
 200 E. Grand Avenue  
 Des Moines, Iowa 50309  
 Phone 515/242-4875  
 Fax 515/252-4809

Kansas Rural Development Council  
 Steven Bittel, Executive Director  
 700 SW Harrison, Suite 1300  
 Topeka, Kansas 66603-3712  
 Phone 913/296-1847  
 Fax 913/296-8132

Louisiana Rural Development Council  
 Pamela Davidson, Chair  
 U.S. Department of Commerce  
 412 North Fourth St., #104  
 Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70802  
 Phone 504/389-0227  
 Fax 504/389-0238

Maine Rural Development Council  
 Robert Ho, Executive Director  
 104 Libby Hall  
 University of Maine, Cooperative Extension  
 Orono, Maine 04469  
 Phone 207/581-3192  
 Fax 207/581-1387

Forum for Rural Maryland  
 Bill Walker, Executive Director  
 Maryland Department of Business  
 and Economic Development  
 Room 1030, 217 E. Redwood St.  
 Baltimore, Maryland 21202  
 Phone 410/767-6518  
 Fax 410/333-1836

Massachusetts Rural Development Council  
 Tom Guerino, Executive Director  
 1408 Goodell Building, University of Massachusetts  
 Amherst, Massachusetts 01003  
 Phone 413/545-4404  
 Fax 413/545-1795

Rural Development Council of Michigan  
 David Skjaerlund, Executive Director  
 P.O. Box 30017  
 Lansing, Michigan 48909  
 Phone 517/373-4550  
 Fax 517/335-1423

Minnesota Rural Partners  
 Marcie McLaughlin, Executive Director  
 328 Stewart Hall, St. Cloud State University  
 720 4th Avenue South  
 St. Cloud, Minnesota 56301-4498  
 Phone 320/255-3834  
 Fax 320/654-5198

Mississippi Rural Development Council  
 Mrs. Neal Jones, Executive Director  
 3825 Ridgewood Road, Room 728  
 Jackson, Mississippi 39211  
 Phone 601/982-6416  
 Fax 601/982-6213

Missouri Rural Opportunities Council  
 Dee Ann Ducote, Executive Director  
 P.O. Box 118  
 301 W. High St., #720  
 Jefferson City, Missouri 65102  
 Phone 573/751-1238  
 Fax 573/526-5550

Montana Rural Development Partnership  
 Gene Vuckovich, Executive Director  
 Community Services Center  
 118 E. 7th St., Suite A, 2nd Floor  
 Anaconda, Montana 59711  
 Phone 406/563-5259  
 Fax 406/563-5476

Nebraska Rural Development Commission  
 Don Macke, Executive Director  
 P.O. Box 94666  
 301 Centennial Mall South, 4th Floor  
 Lincoln, Nebraska 68509-4666  
 Phone 402/471-6002  
 Fax 402/471-3778

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New Hampshire Rural Development Council  
Kelly Goddard, Executive Director  
Office of State Planning, 2 1/2 Beacon Street  
Concord, New Hampshire 03301  
Phone 603/229-0261  
Fax 603/228-4827

New Mexico Rural Development Response Council  
Patrick Vanderpool, Executive Director  
Attn: Economic Development Department  
Joseph Montoya Building, 1100 St. Francis Drive  
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503  
Phone 505/827-0284  
Fax 505/827-1645

New York Rural Development Council  
Dick Mansfield, Executive Director  
133 Warren Hall, Cornell University  
Ithaca, New York 14853  
Phone 607/255-3016  
Fax 607/254-2896

North Carolina Rural Development Council  
Kenneth Flowers, Executive Director  
1300 St. Mary's St., 5th Floor  
Raleigh, North Carolina 27605  
Phone 919/715-2725  
Fax 919/715-2731

North Dakota Rural Development Council  
Cornelius Grant, Executive Director  
1833 E. Bismarck Expressway  
Bismarck, North Dakota 58504  
Phone 701/328-5313  
Fax 701/328-5320

Ohio Rural Development Partnership  
John Steinberger, Jr., Executive Director  
Room 601, 65 South Front St.  
Columbus, Ohio 43215-4193  
Phone 614/466-5495  
Fax 614/466-6124

Oklahoma Rural Development Council  
Phil Watson, Executive Director  
Center for International Trade Development, Suite 105, OSU  
Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078  
Phone 405/744-8897  
Fax 405/744-8973

Oregon Rural Development Council  
Judith St. Claire, Executive Director  
P.O. Box 40204  
Portland, Oregon 97240-0204  
Phone 503/326-5833  
Fax 503/326-5877

Pennsylvania Rural Development Council  
Joe Dudick, Executive Director  
Finance Building, Room 506  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120  
Phone 717/787-1954  
Fax 717/787-8614

South Carolina Rural Economic Development Council  
Frank Garcia, Executive Director  
1201 Main St., 16th Floor, P.O. Box 927  
Columbia, South Carolina 29202  
Phone 803/737-0449  
Fax 803/737-0418

South Dakota Rural Development Council  
Julie M. Johnson, Executive Director  
Capitol Lake Plaza  
711 East Wells Ave.  
Pierre, South Dakota 57501-3369  
Phone 605/773-5653  
Fax 605/773-3256

Texas Rural Development Council  
Cheryl Hinckley, Executive Director  
8140 Burnet Rd., Suite 218  
Austin, Texas 78757-7712  
Phone 512/323-6515  
Fax 512/323-6526

Utah State Rural Development Council  
D. Scott Truman, Executive Director  
S. Utah University, 351 W. Center St.  
Cedar City, Utah 84720  
Phone 801/586-7852  
Fax 801/586-5475

Vermont Council on Rural Development  
Mark Blucher, Chair  
Tutland Regional Planning Commission  
P.O. Box 965  
Rutland, Vermont 05702  
Phone 802/775-0871  
Fax 802/775-1766

Washington State Rural Development Council  
Ellen Hagey, Executive Director  
906 Columbia St., SW, P.O. Box 48300  
Olympia, Washington 98504-8300  
Phone 360/586-8979  
Fax 360/586-0873

West Virginia Rural Development Council  
Joe Barker, Executive Director  
Hillcrest Office Park, 101 Dee Drive  
Charleston, West Virginia 25311  
Phone 304/558-1240  
Fax 304/558-1241

Wisconsin Rural Development Partnership  
Kelly Haverkamp, Executive Director  
45 N. Charter St., #21  
Madison, Wisconsin 53715  
Phone 608/265-4524  
Fax 608/265-3459

Wyoming State Rural Development Council  
Margaret Spearman, Executive Director  
6101 Yellowstone Road, 4th Floor  
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82002  
Phone 307/777-6430  
Fax 307/777-5840

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Note: The National Partnership and several of these State Councils have World Wide Web Home Pages. You can link to the State home pages through the National Home Page at <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/nrdp/>